

Luke 1: 57-80  
Feast of John the Baptist, June 26, 2016

The Truth about Gun Violence

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*Almighty God, by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance: Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and, following his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Last Sunday, I had the bliss of worshipping at the American Cathedral in Paris. The choir were in fine voice on the last Sunday before their summer break. The Dean's sermon was excellent. Afterward, I told her I'd be here for our patronal feast today. Laughingly, we agreed how wonderful it was to celebrate John's birth rather than his martyrdom by beheading.

John the Baptist is the only saint whose birth is told in the gospels. He has a real presence in our scripture. We know a lot about him--down to his dress and diet. By the way, in Bibiclat in the Philippines, villagers honor their patron John by donning capes made of dried banana leaves and mud to walk to church.

Most important, we really know who he was. John the Baptist was prophet. Fearlessly, he told the truth.

On this feast of John the Baptist, I need to share a shameful, painful truth with you. The gun violence that is so present here, is also present now in Paris as it never has been in the decades I've been going there. The truth is that gun violence--which weighs heavily in our hearts particularly on this Gay Pride Sunday--gun violence may be the most successful cultural export of the United States of America.

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Like a slow-growing cancer, gun violence quietly has spread throughout the entire body of humanity. The United States of America is the primary site of this deadly cancer. In the past two generations, it has come to infect the entire world.

There has always been gun violence in America. But it used to be retail--one gun death at a time. And people tended to kill someone they knew. Now it's wholesale and random. Thirty years ago, people didn't regularly open fire to slaughter strangers *en masse*: innocent children in elementary schools, innocent soldiers on an army base, innocent African Americans at prayer, innocent young people partying in clubs on a Saturday night. They didn't have the means. And they didn't have the model. Violence wasn't the staple of television, movies, and games that it has become.

The United States of America has hosted and nurtured this fatal plague. And we have spread it through what a French commentator called "the American cultural industry"--film and television.

Gun violence is a money maker. The arms industry profits from the sale of weapons. The cultural industry profits from the sale of violent movies, television, and games.

Thirty years ago it seemed we had come to our senses. Led by Ronald Reagan, politicians of both parties agreed and banned the kind of assault weapons that have been used in every recent mass shooting.

So what happened? We got complacent. We got lazy. We let it slide. The arms industry and the National Rifle Association quietly went about their wicked work: influencing legislation, eroding regulation, even restricting governmental collection and dissemination of data about gun deaths.

At the same time, as consumers we allowed gun violence in the entertainment media to become ever more pervasive, to become routine, normalized.

Most of us are complicit, responsible to some degree.

I'm a great example. I don't watch violent films or TV, don't play video games. But I haven't raised my voice in public or in the pulpit until now. I haven't phoned or written a single word of protest to my elected representatives until now. (You'll be glad to know I began with Texas, where I'm still a property-owning tax payer.) Nor have I sent money to support the faithful people who valiantly work for sensible gun contro]-from the Bradys to the parents of Sandy Hook children.

I haven't challenged the "studies" that dispute the connection between violence on the screen and in human behavior. Like the now-debunked "studies" that made us believe breakfast was the most important meal of the day, I'll bet they were funded by self-interested industries.

It's nonsense to deny that media influence opinions and behavior. They're the prime tools of propaganda, for heaven's sake!

Knowing all of this, still I have done nothing. Helplessly I have wrung my hands and waited for the latest massacre to turn the tide--at last to raise the consciousness of the masses so that I could follow someone else's lead.

Something shifted in me this trip: seeing heavily armed police on the streets in Paris. It's new. And with the murder of the policeman in the Parisian suburbs last week, it will become the norm. Friends at dinner recalled that during the riots of 1968--the greatest civil unrest of post-war times--French police wore a helmet and a cape; they carried a club.

I know that terrorism plays a role in this change. But we arm the terrorists as well as the gangs world wide.

It is easy to feel helpless as sales of handguns and assault rifles increase with every incident. The latest is a movement--and a website--urging LGBT folk to get armed for self-defense. God save us!

What would John the Baptist say? Repent! And so I have begun to do....

I want to be actively a part of the solution. I am grateful that the Bishops of the Episcopal church have united against gun violence. Their work will be a resource. You may have others. If you're already involved in this and have suggestions, please let me know.

Repenting, I accept responsibility for my passivity as our culture's violence has gone viral.

We are not helpless, not hopeless. Gun control legislation is one issue on which American opinion is actually NOT divided. Even before Orlando, a large majority of Americans were in favor of common-sense limits on guns. The gun lobbies have funded members of both parties in statehouses and Congress. Our silence implies consent.

We need legislation. More fundamentally we need a change of consciousness. History shows how--time and again--humanity awakens to an injustice and does an about-face. The United States led the world in the transformation of consciousness about civil rights and human rights--most recently about LGBT. We can lead here, too. We can use the very same influence that spread the gun-violence culture to curtail it. But we have to change ourselves first.

Violence is popular, we are told. Violence sells.

What if it didn't? What if we stopped going to violent movies? Stopped watching television shows that normalized violence? Stopped playing violent video games? Stopped shrugging our shoulders and saying that's just the way it is? What if we spoke out against them to our friends and neighbors? What if we spent a few minutes a week writing to the makers of the films and games, the sponsors of the shows--telling them that we will not support them.

Sound radical? It is. It goes to the root of the problem in a consumer culture. It can work. The market will respond. Wall-Mart has stopped selling those assault rifles--for now, at least.

Friends, the truth is that no place in America is safe from gun violence. Contrary to the message of the arms industry, we cannot make it safe by carrying guns ourselves. Take it from a Texan: we cannot shoot our way out of this!

We are not powerless. We have the power of faith. The power of hope. The power of prayer. The power of committed community. We have the power of the polls in this democracy. And we have the power of the purse in a consumer society.

We have to use our powers to bring about a sea change. We can: with time, patience, courage, and personal conviction. And we must: for the safety of our schools, streets, shops, and sanctuaries.

In honor of our patron John the Baptist, let us tell the truth about our part in gun violence here and worldwide. For the safety of those we love, let us repent: let us change our own ways. Then let us raise the consciousness of our neighbors--patiently, persistently urging them to change their ways, too.